

## **Olmec Civilization**

The **Olmec** civilization is often called the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica. The first complex society of the area, the Olmecs developed and formalized many of the great hallmarks of Mesoamerican civilization.

The term *Olmec* means "people of the land of rubber." The name was applied by the Aztecs to the people living on the southern edge of the Gulf of Mexico—a low-lying, hot, and humid region where rubber trees are native. When archaeological sites with colossal heads carved in basalt were discovered in the area, archaeologists thought that they were relatively recent in date. A few scholars, however, argued for a greater antiquity. With the advent of more refined dating techniques like radiocarbon dating, the debate was settled: Olmec culture dated from about 1200 to 400 BCE.

Many of the most famous Olmec sites are in the steamy lowlands along the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico, which is where the colossal heads were first found. This area has been called by many scholars the "Olmec heartland," and such sites as San Lorenzo and La Venta are two of the best known and most excavated of all Olmec sites.

In its earliest phases, the Olmec heartland was dotted by small villages and towns whose inhabitants occupied the well-drained river levees and mangrove swamps. Like that of other villages in coastal areas, the environment there provided the Olmec with a rich array of foods. They planted corn and beans in small clearings in the high jungle; gathered wild palm nuts and other plant foods; and captured fish, turtles, clams, and other aquatic life. By 1200 BCE, urban centers began to rise that were too large to call villages. The social life in those centers was much more stratified than in the smaller, more egalitarian villages. A number of centers existed during that time, including San Lorenzo, La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, and Las Limas. La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, and Las Limas may have been the larger and more important centers in Olmec times; however, San Lorenzo is probably the best known to people today.

San Lorenzo was occupied and abandoned repeatedly in its 2,500 years of existence, but it flourished between about 1200 and 900 BCE. The city was located in the highest area in the region, where it would be safe from the flooding of the rivers flowing on all sides. That strategic position allowed the inhabitants to control communications, transportation, and trade in the area. By 1200 BCE, San Lorenzo was the main center of the region, with a royal family and various elites, and crafts people, farmers, fishers, and hunters. The immediate center's population was only about 1,000, but there was probably a population in the tens of thousands in the surrounding areas.

The main part of the site was a huge, partly human-built earth mound some 1,200 meters long by 800 meters wide, on top of which were constructed ceremonial mounds, ritual pools, and a stone drainage system. The huge stone heads and other sculptures (carved from boulders dragged from more than 60 kilometers away) were originally set in groups atop the large mound. Some were found to have been intentionally buried in large trenches; some heads were later discovered where they were apparently stored for recarving. About 900 BCE, many of the stone monuments at San Lorenzo were defaced (it was presumably at that time that some were buried in trenches), and the site was largely abandoned. Possible reasons range from internal revolt or external invasion to volcanic activity in the Tuxtla mountains, which altered the ecological balance in the area.

La Venta's florescence followed the decline of San Lorenzo and is dated from about 900 to 400 BCE. By that

time, the Olmecs had become master craftspeople in another medium, jade, which then became the most prized commodity throughout subsequent Mesoamerican cultures. The original site of La Venta was large, covering more than 80 acres. Its central architectural feature was the Great Mound or Pyramid. Built atop a platform, the mound was more than 30 meters high. Many of the mythic themes of rulership and relationship to ancestors and caves appear at this site, expressed by a wide variety of stunning sculptures carved in volcanic stone, jade, and serpentine. As at San Lorenzo, sculptors at La Venta carved great heads. La Venta suffered a fate similar to that of San Lorenzo: around 400 BCE, some of its monuments were smashed or defaced, and the site was abandoned.

The Olmec heartland was not the only place where the Olmec peoples flourished. Their presence in the highlands of central Mexico is also attested at dozens of sites. Major highland Olmec sites included Chalcatzingo (ca. 1000–500 BCE), just south of Mexico City, and another named Teopantecuanitlan (ca. 900–600 BCE). Those and many other Olmec sites were strategically located to control important resources and trade and communication routes. The large numbers and sheer volume of imported objects in many such sites clearly offer evidence of the Olmecs' ability to command resources from a wide area.

There are still many unanswered questions regarding the Olmecs. For example, was their widespread presence and influence based on political control, economic power, or the spread of an Olmec religion? All three possibilities have been proposed, but as yet, there are no clear answers.

The Olmecs were wonderful artists and produced the first great art style of Mesoamerica. Their stone carvings great and small, their beautifully made and decorated ceramics, and their surviving paintings all are indicative of a mature and self-confident civilization. Many of their images are portraits of their gods, and major advances have been made in "deciphering" the Olmec pantheon. But other pieces are more personal, from the 20-ton portrait heads of their rulers to the smaller jade masks and other objects that have often been found in large numbers in caches.

What can be called classic Olmec civilization declined around 400 BCE, but the Olmec people survived. One of their achievements in later times was the development of a writing system. Traces indicating the first steps toward developing a script can be seen in monuments from La Venta, but evidence indicates that a full-fledged writing system was not used until near the time of Christ. That script, called epi-Olmec, was deciphered by two American scholars, John Justeson and Terrence Kaufman.

### **Further Reading**

Coe, Michael D., and Richard A. Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec*, 1980; Murray, Tim, *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: History and Discoveries*, 2001; Read, Kay Almere, and Jason J. González, *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology*, 2000.

### **MLA Citation**

"Olmec." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 18 June 2014.

## Chavín Civilization

Chavín de Huántar was a large ceremonial and residential center of the Chavín culture, one of the earliest complex cultures in ancient Peru. Located in the Andes Mountains at 10,530 feet above sea level, Chavín de Huántar's position between Peru's arid western coast and the tropical Amazon basin to the east allowed its involvement in the region's extended trade networks. As the major Chavín center, Chavín de Huántar gave its name to the culture itself; moreover, the relief carvings decorating the site's large temple complexes exemplify Chavín artistic motifs. Chavín de Huántar became a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site in 1985. Ongoing threats to the site include flooding, the collapse of structures' entrances and galleries, and the looting of artifacts.

Chavín de Huántar may have been constructed as early as about 900 BCE. It became one of the largest Andean centers, with a substantial residential area distinguishing it from most other Chavín ceremonial centers, which did not include towns. At its peak, Chavín de Huántar's population reached about 3,000. The site flourished during a period of significant advances in Andean agriculture, architecture, trade, and perhaps political organization. Chavín de Huántar's economy was based on agriculture, likely focused on root crops, as well as trade; the site's proximity to a tributary of the Marañón River further enhanced Chavín de Huántar's access to trade contacts. Obsidian from southern Peru and seashells (often used in rituals) from the region that is now coastal Ecuador were among the valued imports brought to Chavín de Huántar. It is thought that Chavín de Huántar's main contribution to the regional exchange networks was a cultural and artistic diffusion, based on imitation of the styles used in Chavín de Huántar's pottery and artwork, which helped unify Chavín culture.

The main structure at Chavín de Huántar is the religious complex known as the Old Temple. While its date of construction is not known for certain, it is thought that the temple was built early in Chavín de Huántar's history. Composed of rubble platforms and walls constructed of monumental, rectangular stone blocks, the temple contained passageways, subterranean galleries, a drainage system, and a central, sunken circular plaza. Shafts ventilated the complex's labyrinth of galleries; it is thought that the galleries may have been used as ritual sites, living quarters for temple workers, and storage areas. Some of the most important examples of decorated ceramics created by the Chavín culture have been found in the temple's galleries. Outside the temple, stone sculptures of human and animal heads were mounted on the outer walls.

In the Old Temple's central, cross-shaped Lanzón Gallery, a megalithic white granite shaft was sculpted in low relief to represent the god El Lanzón. Sometimes called the Smiling God or the Great Image, the statue stands about 15 feet high and portrays an anthropomorphic figure with a feline head and hair made up of serpents. El Lanzón is considered the most important of Chavín deities and was likely the focus of worship in Chavín de Huántar's Old Temple. Scholars speculate that the blend of human and feline features seen in the statue of El Lanzón and in other images at Chavín de Huántar may represent the Chavín religious belief that priests or shamans could transform into jaguars through the ritual use of hallucinogenic substances. A similar figure is depicted on the Raimondi Stone, also found at Chavín de Huántar, which contains a low relief carving of a deity known as the "god of the staffs;" similar images of that deity have been found at such other Andean sites as Tiahuanaco in present-day Bolivia. Like the El Lanzón figure, the god on the Raimondi Stone has a human body and a feline head with fangs. Another significant monument within the Old Temple complex, a pillar called the Tello Obelisk, contains carvings of animal heads, teeth, and a caiman. In addition to the recurring artistic motifs of jaguars and reptiles, many images of eagles and at least one of a hybrid bird with feline features appear at the site.

Chavín de Huántar's New Temple was built as an extension of the Old Temple and incorporated a section of the earlier structure. The New Temple contained plazas, notably a large, rectangular sunken courtyard, as well as a portal built of black and white stones, a network of galleries, and another statue of the god El Lanzón; its right hand holds a strombus (conch) shell while its left hand holds a shell from a mollusk called a spondylus. Caches found in the New Temple's Gallery of the Offerings include broken pots and a variety of animal bones. Human bones discovered in that gallery are thought to indicate ritual cannibalism.

While little is known about Chavín de Huántar's inhabitants, some information has been acquired from the site's few elite tombs in which such luxury items as dyed textiles and objects made of precious metals were placed to accompany the dead. The contrast between wealthy burials and those of the majority of residents, whose tombs held only minimal grave goods, suggests a large gap between social classes. Other artifacts discovered at Chavín de Huántar, at least some of which likely had ritual significance, include mortars, pestles, bone tubes, spatulas, and trumpets made of seashells.

About the third century BCE, Chavín de Huántar and other Chavín sites entered a decline, perhaps because of changes in trade, agriculture, and social structure. Chavín de Huántar's use was altered at that time, with a village built in the Old Temple's circular plaza, carved stones reused in the walls of houses, and many of the original structures allowed to fall down.

### **Further Reading**

Bruhns, Karen Olsen. *Ancient South America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Burger, Richard L. *The Prehistoric Occupation of Chavín de Huántar, Peru*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; Moore, Jerry D. *Architecture and Power in the Ancient Andes: The Archaeology of Public Buildings*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Trigger, Bruce G., et al, eds. *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000 .

### **MLA Citation**

Hutchinson, Jennifer. "Chavín de Huántar." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 18 June 2014.